The Fourth Church Pulpit

MYSTERY AND MEANING

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The basic fact that we dwell in the midst of a reality we cannot understand has been my fulcrum. If we would get to the roots of our troubles, we must come to terms with our radical ignorance. We shall never master life as if it were a mathematical problem. We shall always need to cast ourselves upon its waters, as pilgrims living by faith. The masters of the spiritual life show us why we always depend on the mystery and how we may come to love our constant dependence. What I have loved in contemplation is the relief it offers. My mind clatters along, hour after hour. Entering into the cloud of unknowing finally stops my mind!

John Carmody, *How to Handle Trouble*

FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Isaiah 2:2-5
Romans 11:33-36

"How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"
Romans 11:33b (NRSV)

We tried something new two weeks ago. For several years we have been collaborating with our ecumenical partners in the neighborhood — Holy Name Cathedral, St. James Episcopal Cathedral, First Methodist/Chicago Temple — to hold an old-fashioned community Thanksgiving service on the Monday evening of the week of Thanksgiving. Ecumenical-community Thanksgiving services are wonderful, on paper; a terrific idea which everybody applauds as good and appropriate and faithful. The trouble with them is that nobody much actually attends them other than the clergy and their families, and a few loyal church members who show up to support the minister. Some people come because they truly love the idea, but it's not very many and never has been.

Last year we invited Congregation Kol Ami to join us. Time was when a Jewish rabbi participating in a service at Holy Name Cathedral, sitting in the chancel in front of the high altar, would have been notorious enough to draw a crowd and the press. It did neither. There were a handful of Jewish men and women, and the service at least represented the Judeo/Christian inclusiveness of American culture. But still 99.8% of the people of the congregations stayed home to watch Monday night football.

This year it was our turn to host the service. And this year the planners proposed to try to reflect the true pluralism of our culture by inviting, in addition to Kol Ami, which is now a full partner, the Greek Orthodox, Buddhist and Islamic communities to participate. Now I confess that my enthusiasm for the whole project had begun to fade significantly. I'm certainly not opposed to affirming the wonderful pluralism of our culture. On the contrary. But simply to superimpose three more religious traditions, very different traditions, on a worship service that already was having trouble standing on its own did not seem like a promising idea. One staff member here, who will remain nameless, said it was looking like an ecumenical talent show instead of a worship service. Besides, San Francisco and Miami were playing Monday night football.

The time came for the service. My body was here, although my spirit was elsewhere. Everybody had his or her part. I did the welcome. Father Kantzavelos of the Greek Orthodox Diocese and Canon Janet Campbell from St. James read scripture. Father Bob McLaughlin led a litany. Gene Winkler from First Methodist prayed. Rabbi Denker of Kol Ami was the preacher (and charmed us all by saying he knew he had arrived when a poor Jewish boy from Brooklyn walked down Michigan Avenue and saw his name on the bulletin board outside the Fourth Presbyterian Church). Head Minister of the Buddhist Temple of Chicago, Yukei Ashikaga, read from the Dhammapada and Irfan Ahmad Khan, an Islamic clergy, read from the Koran, in Arabic. As his strong voice, reading Arabic began to fill the sanctuary you could feel something start to happen. And then at the very last minute, the Islamic chanter showed up. Khawaia Khalil Ahmad stood at the lectern and in a clear, resonant, tenor voice chanted long phrases of Islamic holy scripture and prayers, high, clear, almost nasal, but beautifully melodic: the sound like nothing I had ever heard, completely filling this very Gothic, very Anglo-Saxon, very Presbyterian space. Ahmad is skilled at chanting. His phrasing was excellent, his voice well modulated, his passion and commitment to his text, which we of course could not understand, was evident. It went on for several minutes and it was an extraordinary spiritual and transcendent experience. After Rabbi Denker's fine sermon, a soprano from his congregation sang Leonard Bernstein's "A Simple Song," and for the first time in my experience with these ecumenical talent shows, there was deep feeling, deep gratitude, profound worship and not a few teary eyes.

Afterward, the congregation moved into Anderson Hall for refreshments and nobody wanted to leave. We had experienced something uniquely authentic. We had worshipped God, truly, and what enabled it to happen was a liturgical act from a culture very different from our own in a language very few of us could understand.

What had happened? I concluded that the Islamic chanter, with strong assists by the Buddhist reader and Jewish soprano, had reminded us, eloquently, without ever saying a word about it, that human knowledge of God is partial knowledge, that none of us knows the whole truth, sees the whole picture: that God, being God, remains a mystery not altogether accessible to human reason, discourse, or theologizing, sermonizing.

As I thought about it afterward, I remembered something Harvard theologian Diana Eck wrote recently, namely that "Allah" is not the god of Islam. Allah is simply the Arabic word for God; that interfaith conversations — maybe even cross-cultural communication — can begin only when everybody admits that our "knowledge of God is partial because God transcends our complete comprehension." [*Encountering God*, p. 50]

There is a sense in which religious faith is the public confession that we do not have all the answers, all knowledge, all comprehension of God.

Frederick Buechner wrote:

> "At its heart, I think, religion is mystical. Moses with his flocks in Midian, Buddha under the Bo tree, Jesus up to his knees in the waters of Jordan .... Religions start as, Frost said, poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with the bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, or the dove coming down out of the sky." [*The Alphabet of Grace*, p. 74]

No one ever struggled longer or harder intellectually with the complexities of religion than a scholarly Pharisaic Jew from Tarsus by the name of Saul, the Apostle Paul. His great letter to the Church in Rome is an attempt to put the Gospel of Jesus Christ into a systematic, logical package. In the process Paul writes sublimely and gorgeously and at times he gets bogged down, slogging his way through puzzles and enigmas and logical paradoxes. The biggest theological problem the early Christians had was the relationship of the Gospel and Judaism: how is God relating to Israel after Christ? What happens to the notion of election, a chosen people? What will happen to the Jews? Who is right? It's heavy going, and after he has wrestled with it and concluded that God's mercy really is infinite, he hits a kind of theological wall and you can almost feel him taking a deep breath and chuckling at how detailed and certain he, and all theologians, are inclined to become; and then almost in exasperated relief, he wrote what I think are among the most powerful and wise words in the Bible:

> "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord?'" [Romans 11:33-34a]

Who indeed? Faith begins somewhere near the point at which we confess that we don't know the mind of the Lord.

Donald McCullough, new President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, has written a fine little book, *The Trivialization of God*, in which he argues that God is trivialized precisely when people think they know too much about God; that Christian faith includes a reverent agnosticism which knows how to say "I don't know the answer to that." McCullough argues that confessing the inadequacy of our knowledge and understanding of God, our spiritual emptiness, is the only way God can reveal what we need to know about God.

The trouble with religion McCullough says "is that it claims to know too much."

Advent worship begins here this morning, as it does every year, with a mystical hymn 1,500 years old. "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand ...."

But mostly we Presbyterians come to worship, McCullough says, "as though attending a football game, or a movie as though it were entirely natural for humans to meet God. No big deal to meet the Lord of the universe."

Evangelical services, McCullough says, "move through chatty certainties about God: happy smiles radiate from smooth-talking preachers who demonstrate absolutely no reticence to speak on behalf of the Almighty. In liberal churches the language may be more uncertain about God, but that is more than compensated for by confidence about what in God's name should be done in society."

Both evangelicals and liberals "flatten the vertical into the horizontal, any sense of transcendence gets banished by boring banalities: the affair has all the mystery of the city zoning commission." [p. 57]

What we dare to say about God must begin in a profound silence of not knowing: "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence."

Now you may recognize that what I am saying, this approach to faith issues I am laying out here, is not particularly popular today. It is a time of profound questioning from within American culture; a time of self-doubt, self-examination when in the public arena the main event is thinking about who we are and deciding what we want to be in the next century. And all that the energy and the action seems to be in nailing down our certainties, articulating our absolutes and fighting it out with whoever dares to differ.

That process has become very heated and contentious. A reactionary dimension in the American people has found a voice and argues, strongly, that it is time for declaring what we know, for closing our borders, for drawing moral and ethical and theological lines in the sand, forcing school children to pray, for instance, and excluding those whose behavior challenges the moral certainties of those who have found their voice. Just this week the organizers of the annual Christmas parade in Key West, Florida — Protestant churches mostly — refused to allow the Metropolitan Community Church to participate. The Metropolitan Community Church serves mainly gay and lesbian Christians. James Davison Hunter invented a name for the process, "Culture Wars," marked by extremist rhetoric and an absolute lack of civility. It is difficult to be civil when you know the absolute truth. In fact, armed with God's absolute truth, you can do almost whatever you think you have to do to protect the truth ..., bomb a clinic, shoot a doctor .... A speaker, a minister in fact, at a recent Christian Coalition conference called Planned Parenthood the most "ravenous, bloodthirsty group of perverts ever to assemble in the history of the world." [*The Christian Century,* November 22, 1995, p. 1102]

And it was just a month ago that a young man killed the Prime Minister of Israel claiming he had acted on orders from God. *Newsweek* observed that those orders didn't come to him "through voices in his head: the voices he heard were on the radio, in the coffee shops and synagogues."

And so we come to Advent, just as darkness seems to have overcome light and the abbreviated days feel almost mystical. We sing "What Child Is This" and in our better moments we mean to ask the question, seriously, "What child is this, who laid to rest, On Mary's lap is sleeping?"

Diana Eck reminds us that in spite of the angels and glorias and astrologers from the East, the people on the scene didn't know. Mary, the mother, probably knew more than most, but even she is silent, pondering all of it in her heart. Today Professor Eck observes "there is too much certainty and too little pondering." [p. 103]

At every stage along the way of our spiritual journey, at each stop, each crisis, each milestone, there is, I believe, both meaning and mystery, certainty and uncertainty, faith and doubt, and the reason is that the object is not something that will be pinned down, not a mathematical formula, a thesis, an idol — but God, ultimate reality, mystery behind all that is. I suppose I was struck and moved by the Islamic chanting at our Thanksgiving service because I had heard the sound before, two months ago, in East Jerusalem, in the Garden of the Open Tomb. 53 of us were there at the end of a long day. We had visited the tomb and now were in a quiet alcove to celebrate communion. David Donovan and I presided as best we could, and as we said the words of the institution "On the night he was betrayed ..." we heard the Muslim call to prayer from the minarets wafting over the city and were deeply aware of the mystery of our God and the way the sacrament testifies to the mystery.

Ann Weems, one of our fine Presbyterian writers, a poet, whose prayers and poems we have come to love, lost a son and poured out her broken heart in a book, *Psalms of Lament.* They are beautiful, but they are not easy to read because she says bluntly, but eloquently, what is on her heart.

Near the end of the book she invokes the image of communion ... and the mystery:

"I stand at your empty table,
O Holy One,
And ask to be fed
But there is no bread.
Is there no place
at the table
for
damaged hearts
and scarred souls?"

And then:

"I will stand at your empty table
and wait
Until you come
Your arms full of bread,
the wine splashing
as you walk.
Come, O Holy One
and feed me."

God has come. Out of the mystery of eternity, God has come in the simplicity and mystery of birth.

And God will come. And Christ will be born again in hearts that are silent and open and hungry and thirsty and waiting.

Amen.